

**Amendments to the Claims:**

This listing of claims will replace all prior listings of claims in the application:

**Listing of Claims:**

1. (currently amended) A method of detecting the presence of a target ~~nucleic acid~~ RNA molecule in an acellular biological sample from an animal suspected of suffering from a disease, the method comprising:  
providing the acellular biological sample;  
contacting the sample with a polynucleotide probe that specifically hybridizes to a target nucleic acid molecule that comprises sequences from the animal's germline DNA, and  
detecting a hybridization complex comprising the nucleic acid probe as indicative of the presence of the target nucleic acid molecule in the acellular biological sample.
2. (cancelled)
3. (currently amended) The method of claim 1, wherein the target ~~nucleic acid~~ RNA molecule comprises sequences transcribed from rearranged germline DNA.
4. (original) The method of claim 3, wherein the rearranged germline DNA comprises Alu-like sequences.
5. (original) The method of claim 3, wherein the rearranged germline DNA comprises SINES.
6. (currently amended) The method of claim 1, wherein the target ~~nucleic acid~~ RNA molecule comprises chimeric sequences.
7. (original) The method of claim 1, wherein the acellular biological sample is serum or plasma.

8. (original) The method of claim 1, wherein the animal is suspected of having a chronic illness.

9. (original) The method of claim 8, wherein the chronic illness a spongiform encephalopathy.

10. (original) The method of claim 9, wherein the spongiform encephalopathy is bovine spongiform encephalomyelitis.

11. (currently amended) The method of claim 1, wherein the step of contacting includes a step of amplifying the target ~~nucleic acid~~ RNA molecule.

12. (currently amended) The method of claim 11, wherein the step of amplification is carried out using a reverse transcriptase polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR).